

# EPA expects to remove asbestos home insulation

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The Daily Inter Lake

The top official for the Environmental Protection Agency told Sen. Max Baucus on Thursday she expects the removal of vermiculite insulation from Libby homes to proceed.

Baucus, D-Mont., was en route to Libby for town meetings about the asbestos problem. He stopped at Glacier Park

International Airport to make a telephone call to intervene at a closed meeting in Washington, D.C., between top EPA brass and W.R. Grace officials.

The two groups were discussing a regional EPA proposal to declare a public health emergency in Libby that would set the stage for the removal of insulation from about 800 Libby homes and buildings.

When Baucus was

denied access to the meeting, he telephoned EPA Administrator Christine Whitman to get her opinion about the proposal. She didn't attend the private meeting.

"I have quite a strong impression that she'll make the decision to remove the friable insulation from Libby homes," Baucus said after his conversation with Whitman. "It looks like the declaration will be made unless

there's significant information to the contrary, which there doesn't seem to be."

Grace's former vermiculite mine at Libby produced the raw material for the insulation, and the community continues to deal with health problems linked to decades of exposure to asbestos, a toxic byproduct from the mining process.

EPA tests of dust, insulation and yard soil at Libby homes are the basis for the

federal proposal. Tests revealed asbestos fibers in 73 percent of the vermiculite insulation samples, and asbestos concentrations as high as five percent. The federal benchmark is one percent.

Whitman told Baucus she's impressed with EPA on-site coordinator Paul Peronard's analysis.

If the once-popular Zonolite brand insulation

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## Asbestos insulation to be removed in Libby

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is labeled as a hazardous product in Libby's case, it carries national implications. Up to 15 million homes are insulated with the insulation.

"I didn't ask about the national implications, and frankly I don't know how relevant it is," Baucus said. "This is about the health and safety of Libby, period."

Many Libby residents were upset because they weren't allowed to participate in the private meeting between Grace and the EPA, Baucus said.

"I share their concern. Clearly, the process has to be open and fair, and this is perceived as potentially unfair."

Region 8 EPA officials who

formulated and shepherded the proposal also didn't attend the meeting, but had a telephone link.

Officials from the EPA and Grace said there is nothing sinister about the meeting, which Grace requested. Both sides characterized it as a listening session, Baucus said.

"Grace wanted to present their side and it's proper and fair to listen," he said.

Grace officials were unavailable for comment about the outcome of the meeting.

The intent of the proposed public health emergency declaration is to allow the EPA to remove Zonolite from Libby homes as part of its asbestos cleanup efforts. Two months ago, Gov. Judy Martz recommended the "silver bullet" fast-track for Superfund cleanup.

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